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THE MODERN NOVEL.

BY AMELIA E. BARR, AUTHOR OF "JAN VEDDER'S WIFE," "A
DAUGHTER OF FIFE," "THE LAST OF THE M'ALLISTERS,"
"A BOW OF ORANGE RIBBON," ETC., ETC.

THE smart scandalous stories of Mrs. Behn and Mrs. Manley were the beginnings of the English novel, and from these erotic attempts, by Sterne's wayward fancy, and Johnson's severe morality, we come to Fielding, Richardson and Miss Burney, the real indicators of the province of the novelist: laughing at the follies of society, ridiculing its petty vices, and making pictures of the every-day life of the period. This is an evanescent rôle; therefore novels, like almanacs, lose their interest, and pass away with the time they represent.

No novelist has escaped this contingency of his vocation; not even Bulwer, whose finger was ever on the pulse of the age. Scott has long ceased to charm; and if Dickens and Thackeray could bring us another *Pickwick* and *Esmond*, would they again find a multitude of enthusiastic readers? Not likely, unless the world should step backward, for the novelist who hits the taste of his own generation cannot be abreast of the taste of the generation that follows him.

So then the popular novel is the one which reflects best the time and circumstances wherein we each play our own interesting parts; and this truth accounts for the variety and number of the novels of the present day. The whole world is now open to the story-teller; and life has infinite diversities. It is also physically and mentally restless, and it has vast spiritual uncertainties and speculations. And, as on many of these lines women have a keener instinct and further intuition than men have, women find their work quite as much in request as that of the other sex. In-

deed, there is an impression that the sensational novel is entirely a feminine production, while it is really men who excel in it. Nor is there anything derogatory in this fact, for the good sensational novel requires a practised writer, and evinces as much genius in one direction as the analytic novel does in another. To make murder and bigamy interesting to educated people, a vigorous style and plenty of incident are needed.

Even the sensational stories of a low grade—crude, romantic, and without literary merit—are not to be wholly condemned. They are the sole mental food that great masses of slightly educated people will accept; and though only the adventures of cowboys, or the sorrows of pretty dressmakers, they are something better than the blank stupidity of their own minds. Intellectually, they may be trashy; and morally, they may be weak; but as a rule they do show that virtue gets the better of vice. This class of the community is just beginning to enjoy books, and the first steps in any popular development are full of vulgarities; but as it advances, the books written for it will improve in tone and quality.

It is the erotic-sensational novel which deserves unqualified anger and disgust, for it is the representation, by genius, of a society that lives for the gratification of its five senses, and that only. These novels, with their demi-nude and demi-monde experiences, sap all moral perceptions, and teach only one vile lesson—that we may sin, if we only sin neatly and take care not to be found out. A good writer stooping to work of this kind is like a fine lapidary wasting his skill in cutting pastes instead of diamonds. And the worst of the position is that he knows it and makes money by it.

The criminal novel is another development of the sensational novel, and it has lately grown in popularity; but though it takes a high order of genius to make its complications move steadily and swiftly to their *dénouement*, not even the master pens of Balzac, Gaboriau, and Conan Doyle can divest it of the flavor of brothels, prisons, and morgues. However, if people enjoy the game between criminals and detectives, the question is simply whether the exhibition is, or is not, a moral one—whether the details of crime, the telling of how it was done, how it was concealed, and how it was found out, may not be a kind of criminal school, for those whose inclinations lead them in that di-

rection. Both in the criminal and the erotic-sensational novel, the most dangerous element is the *contemporaneous* one. If such stories could be laid a few centuries back, they would do no harm ; men are not made thieves by reading of Ali Baba, and women are not led astray by the example of Queen Guinevere. But when the heroes and heroines are men and women of like passions with ourselves, and living in our midst, they have all the wicked influence of personal bad company.

The staple, however, of our modern novels may be called domestic and semi-religious, and it is highly creditable to modern society that this is the case. These "fireside concerns," as the critics call them, have given us heroines of purity and unselfishness, women who have never, it is true, felt impelled to study art or acting, or to take to the lecturer's platform, but who have upheld the highest standard of womanly virtue and tenderness. The heroines of Miss Austen, Mrs. Gaskell, Miss Yonge, Mrs. Oliphant, George Eliot, Mr. Trollope, and others may have their little fits of bad temper, envy, spitefulness, and waywardness, but murder, adultery, and theft would be impossible ideas in connection with them. And they have had during the last fifty years a distinct social power, for it was these novels which first showed girls how beautiful a thing it was to visit the poor and the sick, to teach in Sunday-schools, and to embroider altar cloths. Even in the direction of fashionable society, no girl could have a finer chaperon than Mr. Trollope, for he never introduces her to exceptionable characters, and he makes love and marriage healthy domestic pleasures.

It is probable that this class of novels has had an equally good influence over the respectable young men of the same period ; for they gave to their good and lovely heroines men worthy of them—high-souled students, soldiers, and sailors ; conscientious curates ; or, as in Mr. Kingsley's novels, earnest, God-fearing young fellows, physically and morally healthy, doing their duty without any nonsense about it. Of course such novels were a temptation in the hands of weak writers, to prose and preach, and make books full of prigs and prudes, which quite deserved the quasi-contemptuous name of "fireside concerns," or "annals of the drawing-room"; but even so, they are far better than those other "concerns" of the brothel and the prison.

Another popular form of the domestic novel is the analytic.

Mr. Trollope's and Mr. Howells' works may be taken as fine representatives of it. This novel is at the antipodes of the novel of incident, or romance, which finds in Mr. R. L. Stevenson its present illustrator. There is a natural antagonism between these two novels. Mr. Howells thinks that "it is, after all, what a writer has to say, rather than what he has to tell, that we care for nowadays"; and Mr. Stevenson is puzzled at the people who "look down on incident, and reserve their admiration for the click of teaspoons and the accents of curates." The fact is, Mr. Stevenson likes incident, and can describe it well; and Mr. Howells likes analyzing character and motives, and he wisely does what he can do so cleverly. Both are favorites, though Mr. Howells' thoughtful readers call Mr. Stevenson's incidents "improbabilities"; and Mr. Stevenson's readers say "they like to know what was done, and don't care about the state of mind it was done in." In weaker hands than Mr. Howells', this "analysis of character" is often carried to a point where the author, like the knife-grinder, "story has none to tell"; and then we naturally weary of descriptions of vacillating women, and selfish lovers, and of dull people who never make a remark without explaining *why* they make it.

To be a popular novelist is to be the recipient of a love passing the love of woman. Even newspapers, who scold senators and accuse every public institution and every form of religion, have a peremptory "*Hush!*" if a word is said against their favorite novelist. For when an honest reader is made better, or wiser, or happier by a book, he feels justly indebted to the author of it. And it is well for writers that the rewards and renown of literature are now conferred by ballot of the people, and not by the educated antipathies and prejudices of any school or academy. Indeed, the academical spirit is dead, and no literary senate sits either in the Old World or in the New. If, then, an author is popular, he has the verdict of a world-wide tribunal, and a *prima-facie* evidence that what he writes has a positive value to some class of humanity.

It is not, however, likely that any novelist does constantly his best work. The public taste is to be consulted, and the larger a writer's audience, the lower must be its average taste; yet it is the average that must be written for, if financial rewards are looked to. This accounts for the commonplace character of the

modern novel ; the general taste of the era is commonplace, and it has no more desire for the heroic in its books than it has for tragedy in its theatres. What people want first of all is a story, a good plot, and not many tepid enthusiasms about scenery. The landscape business in novels has been overdone ; the very worst use scenery can be put to is to describe it in a novel, unless it is used in connection with humanity, or as productive of some actual sensation in those who see it.

The age scarcely does justice to the power of the popular novel, even when it works on an average level. Mr. Mill might have included novelists who have clear views on any subject, with members of legislative bodies and editors of great newspapers as "direct and immediate influences." For novels now depict everything and everybody, and all kinds of human character may be found on a railway bookstall. Novels are the sermons of this era, and a favorite novelist exerts a deeper and far more extensive influence than any living clergyman ; not in the formation of this or that special opinion, but in a subtle and permanent bias and prepossession over the whole character. And when men and women of all ages are constantly under these interesting sermons, it is worse than idle to say that "nothing comes of it."

The best novels are written by men and women who have seen life in all its variations of joy and sorrow, triumph and failure. With this rich experience, and a fine imagination, the novel lends itself to every variety of emotion, political, social, and religious ; to every mode of thought, to every shade of speculation, on every topic, in heaven or on earth. This necessity for experience, with all it comprehends, is the reason we have so few young novelists of continuous power. The imaginary pictures constructed out of the inner consciousness of the young can have little value, since they must be the result of what has been read in other novels, and not of what has been suffered or experienced by the writer.

No gift of the Almighty is so little valued by the hand-workers of the world as the royal power of imagination. Parents nearly always think it a disqualifying preparation for money-making. Yet, imagination is one of the grandest forces in actual life, and only the ignorant despise it. The ability to "conceive the absent as if it were present" would enable many a man to set his temptation visibly before him, and see the consequences of his act. An eminent English historian attributes the Indian

Mutiny to Lord Dalhousie's want of imagination ; his inability to conceive the results of his provoking acts. Mr. Disraeli finds the same fault with the political genius of Sir Robert Peel. Mr. Mill says the want of imagination vitiates the whole philosophy of Bentham. In the same way, fraud arises less often from conscious roguery than from an inability to "conceive the absent as if it were present," and by the power of imagination see the results of a dishonest act. We all know people who will weep over a novel or a play, and yet care nothing for the suffering around them. This is because the novelist or the playwright brings vividly before their imagination the fictitious suffering ; but they have no imagination of their own to realize the actual suffering. Therefore, even men who are to be employed in commerce or statesmanship might take a course of good novels to stimulate their imagination ; for imagination aids foresight and enables us to estimate probable results.

As for novels being unlike life, this charge cannot be brought against the best of modern novels. It is really a succession of brilliant photographs of contemporary life ; and the improbable incidents in most novels are very likely the real ones ; for ordinary lives appear to be commonplace, because we know nothing about them. The records of our criminal courts are more improbable than any modern novel ; and families that seem to differ in no way from other families might be subjects for epics, as wonderful and horrible as the houses of Pelops and Labdacus.

Another advantage in the modern novel is that it gives the young a much better idea of the relations between men and women than they could form for themselves, or from bad books or company. Novels do not breed sentiment ; however early they come to a boy or girl they find the sentiment already there. The oldest and best nursery books recognize this element. Whittington's master's daughter is quite as important as Whittington's cat ; and never a fairy prince without a fairy princess. The young man of the present day does not fail on the side of modesty, but it might tone down his disagreeable self-confidence if he learned through Mr. Trollope and others how often the irresistible young man of a tale is rejected by the heroine, and that the rejection is in no way fatal to her.

As to the important subject of "asking *the* question," novels are a perfect school of ways and means, of what is to be sought,

and what is to be avoided. Would any lover who had read *Granby* take his mistress on the water to propose to her? No; he would consider the possibility of having to row her back. a sulky and disappointed man. The men who become old bachelors are the men who take no counsel from Miss Yonge or Mrs. Oliphant, from Mr. Besant or Mr. Trollope, or any other reputable guide. Indeed, the latter gentleman's strong point is his delightful lovemaking and his straightforward proposals.

Women are practically affected by novels far more than men are, for the experience of men enables them to dispute or dilute or correct many things said. But a woman's life is greatly influenced by the fiction she reads. She draws her ideas from her favorite books; she tries to speak, and act, and dress like her favorite heroines. How good, then, it must be for an egotistical, selfish girl to have a course of George Eliot's novels! for her constant lesson through her characters is that the world was not made for them alone. She knocks the selfishness out of them all, or she punishes them for retaining it. She is also a good teacher for girls self-willed and self-opinionated; for all her good, lovable women need a master and a rule of life; yes, even Romola needed Savonarola.

The one thing to be regretted in many of the lighter novels of the day is their kind of heroine. She is not a nice girl. She talks too much, and talks in a slangy, jerky way, that is odiously vulgar. She is frank, too frank, on every subject and occasion. She is contemptuous of authority, even of parental authority, and behaves in a high-handed way about her love affairs. She is, alas! something of a Freethinker. She rides a bicycle, and plays tennis, and rows a boat. She laughs loudly, and dresses in manly fashion, and acts altogether in accord with an epoch that travels its sixty miles an hour. She is very smart and clever, but in her better moments she makes us sigh for the girls who thought their parents infallible and who were reverent churchwomen—the girls who were so shrinkingly modest, and yet so brave in great emergencies—the girls who were so fully accomplished and so beautiful, and who yet had no higher ambition than to be the dearly loved wife of a noble-hearted man and the good house-mother of happy children. Perhaps fifty years after this, the world will look back to this picturesque, lovable creature, and give her a glorious resurrection.

There is more probability of this resurrection, if we reflect that women are likely to be the popular novelists of the future, although there must always be some departments of fiction which they will be incompetent to undertake. They may preserve the finer ideals and illusions of the race, but they can never know life as a soldier, or lawyer, or a man of business can know it; nor would a man's knowledge of life be a gift that any kind fortune would bestow upon a woman. There will then continue to be specialties for both sexes, though it is likely in poetry and fiction women will take the leading part. Indeed this is evident in the periodical literature of the day; for if a few numbers of the current magazines be examined, it will be seen that in the long run there are six, perhaps nine, muses to one Apollo; nor will unprejudiced criticism find appreciable difference in the quality of the work, though it may differ in kind. On the whole, it is likely that women will prove themselves to be just as good as men at their best, and just as dull as men at their worst.

But good or bad, no one can consider the young men of the rising generation, and hope much from them in a literary direction. At every university, at every petty country school, the "terms" are fast becoming mere periods for the education of the human muscles—a fact parents may consider if they please—and the interest that used to attach to the class list, and to Tripos papers, is now transferred to the ball game or the boat race. Athletic contests have certainly one moral advantage—they teach men to deserve success, and yet be prepared to suffer defeat and disappointment without losing hope or temper.

However, it is not the moral, but the literary, side of the athletic question which interests us at this time. Are young men who consider bodily strength the one thing needful, likely to give much time to mental speculation and fanciful dreaming? Are human beings who have turned themselves into machines for making a "score" likely to tell love-tales and evoke romance from their pugilistic consciousness? And if they do, what will be the character of their heroes and heroines? Will not the hero be a famous "pitcher," leaping and loving, and free from faults as from fat? And the heroine, will she not be a smart girl, enthusing her lover by wearing his colors and screaming "'Rah! 'rah! 'rah!'" till her voice fails her?

Perhaps so; but we have more reason to expect that men

trained in this fashion will be the *doers*, and not the dreamers, of the future. They ought to open up mines and drain lands, and drive machinery, and fight battles, and carry ships across the ocean. Thews and sinews are not needed for novel writing ; but they are needed to colonize Africa and to revolutionize Asia ; to fight anarchy and to protect liberty. They are needed to utilize old inventions and to perfect new ones ; and these young athletes may look over the map of the world and find that thews and sinews have their work laid out for the next century.

Woman is the born story-teller of humanity, and men may very well leave her to strike the note to which the fiction of the twentieth century will respond. No one has yet prophesied how low, or how high, that note will be ; but it is not likely that we shall have in the future such elaborate, careful, thoughtful work as the past has given us in *Middlemarch*, *Romola*, *Les Misérables*, or the best of Meredith's novels. The world will live too fast, and travel too fast, to read tales which are really epics and philosophy. Life will be too eager and mechanical for fine novels, though the world will never grow too old or be too busy to say, " Tell us a story." It may like to have its religion, philosophy, and politics administered in novels ; but it is far more likely to ask only amusement, only the ever-welcome repetition of that old story of love, that is forever young ; for when men and women seek amusement as a relief from positive work, they do not like to enter what they think is a theatre, and find it to be a temple.

If this view of novel-writing does not promise any enduring fame for novelists, if it leaves them as simple chroniclers of the work and ways of their own day, instead of writers for future ages, there is no discredit and no injury. Blessed are those who can serve their contemporaries ! they have some tangible results for their labor. Posterity may mean well, but it cannot be trusted. If Byron, Keats, Carlyle, Coleridge, and others know anything now of this life, they must wish they had never written for posterity. An appreciative present is a very good thing ; and to be forgotten is a greater posthumous luxury than to be tied to an eternity of human investigation, whether for praise or for disapproval.

AMELIA E. BARR.